



Understanding unconscious bias in the workplace

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“Inclusion” and “diversity” are buzzwords in today’s business world but greater awareness does not necessarily spell real or lasting change.

One of the biggest hurdles is unconscious bias. Collins Dictionary defines this as “a preference or prejudice of which a person holding it is not aware”.

How do we become familiar with our own implicit biases? Do we recognise the extent to which these affect others? How can we help people overcome biases to help build fairer, more equal workplaces?

Jenny Garrett, an award-winning career coach, writes books that explore the empowerment of working women and ethnic minorities. In this careers advice surgery, she answers your questions.

Garrett uses her years of experience to help people as they try to advance at work. She also supports business leaders who want to bring about inclusion.

Thank you to everyone who submitted questions for this session.

How do you talk about unconscious bias without causing offence?

Sharing your own unconscious bias can be a good place to start. Some examples of how to begin such a conversation are:

- “I found out that we all have unconscious bias. My bias is xxx, have you explored yours?”
- “When I realised my unconscious bias was xxx, I could put things in place to counter it. Before that I wasn't aware.”
- Begin a conversation with the words "I noticed..." An example of this could be, "I noticed that when xxx speaks, their ideas are dismissed. Why do you think that is?"

I am one of only a few women in my workplace. I would like advice on dealing with a senior leader who displays bias against me

This is a challenge that many women experience. When you get feedback, ask if they would say the same thing to a male colleague – for example, men are never told to smile more. When a statement is flipped in this way, it can help leaders recognise their bias.

Another option is to ask a male ally to advocate for you. This may get a better reception than if you do it. Such a colleague does not have a vested interest and will not be seen as having a chip on their shoulder.

Some people use humour: “You are not going to ask me to make the tea and take the minutes again are you? We’re not in the 1950s.”

Is proximity bias a common issue? Should I worry about it now that I'm fully remote?

Absolutely. Women are more likely than men to have to home-school or look after elderly relatives. They suffered from proximity bias during the pandemic. Those who had more face-to-face time with colleagues were often thought to be working harder and were remembered when opportunities and promotions came along.

If you are fully remote, having regular one-to-ones is key, as is making your mark in online meetings by showing up on camera, speaking up and adding to the conversation. Talk to your line manager and the team. Share the impact and the value that you bring on a regular basis.

I've read a few articles about unconscious bias training and how hard it can be to get right. If I want to facilitate training for my team, what should I look for?

The key to any training of this type is the action taken afterwards. It is important to have a safe space without shame or blame in which to reflect and be vulnerable. You also need to analyse what it means for you and the work you do, and to decide on the small actions you can put in place to counter your bias.

Accountability is important, too, so schedule regular checks to see how you are doing. These will stop you falling back into old habits.

Unconscious bias is an uncomfortable subject as it forces people to see themselves in a way they don't want to. How can people move past this discomfort/resistance?

First, realise that we all have biases and they have kept us safe and helped us.

Second, remember that you can change; you can train your brain to think differently.

Third, remember that growth and comfort cannot coexist. To be a better colleague, leader or parent you have to step out of your comfort zone.

What do you say to someone who feels that they do not have any biases?

How do you make choices in life? Our biases are what enable us to sort through information and make decisions.

Alternatively, I would ask a simple question, such as: “If you had to choose between a male and female candidate for a role, and everything about them was exactly the same, how would you choose?”

While everyone talks about diversity, my company is not delivering on it. It does not even see the huge amount of bias (unconscious or not) within the company. How can I help management to recognise the problem?

The creation of employee resource groups can give a voice to people, which will help to influence senior managers. Staff in such groups can also support each other.

Point out the dangers of treating inclusion lightly. Show senior leaders that it can affect where people want to work. Ignoring the issue may mean they miss out on the best talent.

You should also highlight the fact that consumers and suppliers prefer to deal with inclusive organisations. They will shun companies that do not “walk the talk”, and it can take a long time to recover from being seen in a poor light.

Lastly, according to research, organisations that are not diverse at senior levels lag behind the competition. No organisation wants that.